



Pick Your Path to Health

Making Safe Sexual Choices: Condoms are Safe and Abstinence is Even Safer

Many sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are out there, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV/AIDS. Considering that 15.3 million new cases of STDs are diagnosed each year, it is extremely important for you and your partner to protect yourselves.

Abstinence is the best policy

The only 100% sure way to protect yourself is to not have sex. It only takes one sexual contact with someone who has an STD to catch it. Despite all the references to sex in the popular media, it is possible to be in a committed relationship and not have sex. You just have to decide that that is what you want and then make sure that your partner understands that you are serious about it.

Abstaining from sexual activity does not mean that you can't express your feelings for your partner, says Gail E. Wyatt, Ph.D., a noted psychologist, author, and professor at UCLA. Kissing on the mouth, ears, and neck can be loving, and even massages, dancing, and hugging can show your feelings.

"Sex is kissing, holding hands, and saying warm and tender things to each other, and cuddling," says Dr. Wyatt. "So, if that's what you want, just say to your partner, 'What I want is to be held, clear and simple.'"

SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, suggests, winding down at the end of a long day by exchanging foot rubs-it can be soothing and playful and can release muscle tension.

Monogamy

If you decide to be sexually active, the safest route is with a mutually faithful, uninfected partner. To be completely sure that both you and your partner are uninfected, you will have to be tested. It is not enough to "trust" your partner. It is important to wait until you are absolutely certain about your partner's health history. Your life may depend on it.

Make sure to receive treatment if an infection is diagnosed and talk to your doctor about steps you need to take to control the infection and to not infect others. Remember, only a doctor can tell whether or not someone is infected since some STDs don't have noticeable symptoms, so both of you have to get tested.

Condom use essential

If you are going to be sexually active, you should make condom use a habit. Using a condom is still considered the best way to protect you from HIV and many other STDs, but it is by no means foolproof.

Although condoms are found to be completely safe in the laboratory, human error can decrease the effectiveness in the real world. In order to stay completely protected, make sure you use a condom every time and make sure to put the condom on before any contact. Always avoid sexual activity when using drugs or alcohol, because they can impair your judgement and your ability to use the condom correctly.

'He won't wear one'

If your partner has told you that he won't wear a condom, you are not the first. Even though people know that condoms can protect against STDs and pregnancy, many still refuse to use them. In a recent telephone interview of heterosexuals, 54 percent of participants thought the condom might fail during intercourse, 41 percent complained that sex doesn't feel as good with a condom, 35 percent felt uncomfortable buying condoms, and 21 percent felt uncomfortable putting them on. It is likely that your partner has one of those reasons.

If your partner refuses to wear a condom, insist that you talk about it. Explain what you know about safe sexual behavior and condom use. If your partner feels uncomfortable buying the condoms, then you can offer to buy them. In the end, if he refuses to wear a condom, you should be concerned, and reconsider the relationship. Again, your life is at stake here.

Tips for Staying Safe

Follow these steps to get yourself on the road to consistently safe sex:

- Seriously consider whether you want to have sex with your partner and make sure that you are comfortable with your decision.

- Stay abstinent or have sex only with a mutually committed and infection-free partner.
- No matter who your partner is, make sure both of you are tested for HIV and other STDs. Make sure both of you receive treatment for any infections.
- Talk to your partner about protection. Make sure your partner knows that you expect to protect yourself every time you have sex, and that this is important to your health.
- Use a condom every time and only use each condom once.
- Do not use condoms that are past the expiration date-they may be less effective.
- Do not use a condom from a torn or open package. If there is even a tiny hole in the condom, throw it away and use another one.

Following these steps will lead you down a path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to request weekly health tips by e-mail, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.